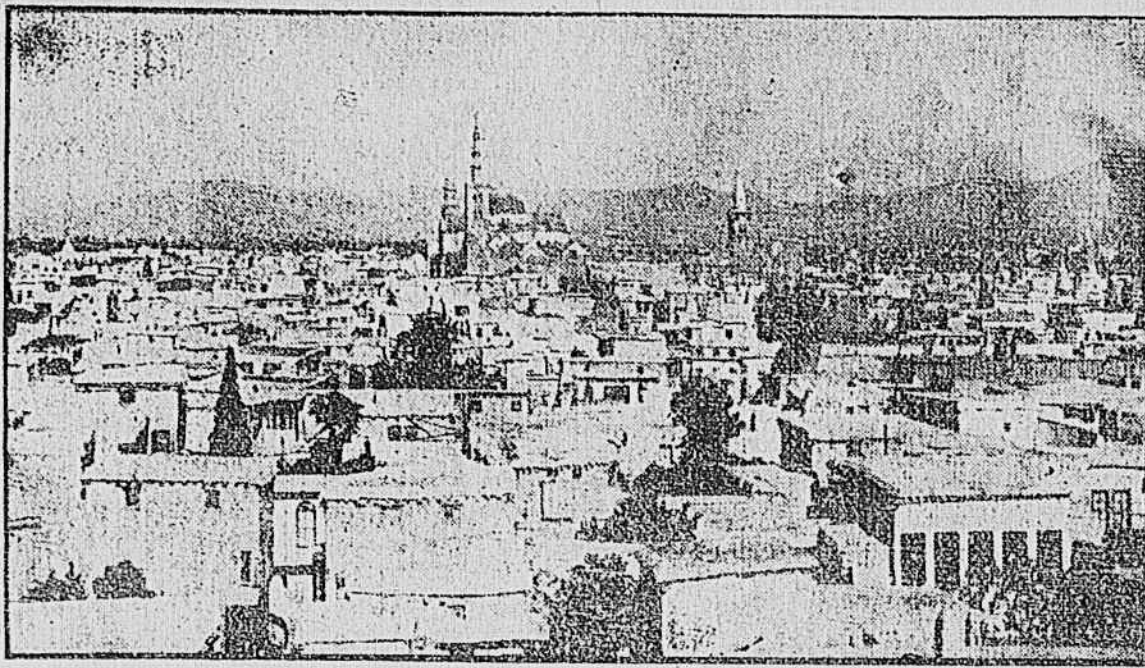


Damascus, the World's Oldest City--Town Founded by Great-Grandson of Noah--Travels in Footsteps of Abraham



VIEW OF DAMASCUS, THE WORLD'S OLDEST CITY.

WALL OF DAMASCUS OVER WHICH ST. PAUL WAS LET DOWN IN A BASKET.

BY FRANK G. CARPENTER.

Stand with me on the slope of the Lebanon Mountains and take a look over Damascus. We have climbed the road which was cut out for Kaiser Wilhelm, the Emperor of Germany, when he visited this region ten years ago, and are now on a bare lofty hill which the Mohammedans consider one of the holy spots of the world. It is where the prophet Mohammed stood and gazed at the magnificent town which Damascus was in his day. He stayed here for hours, and then, turning away with a sigh, said:

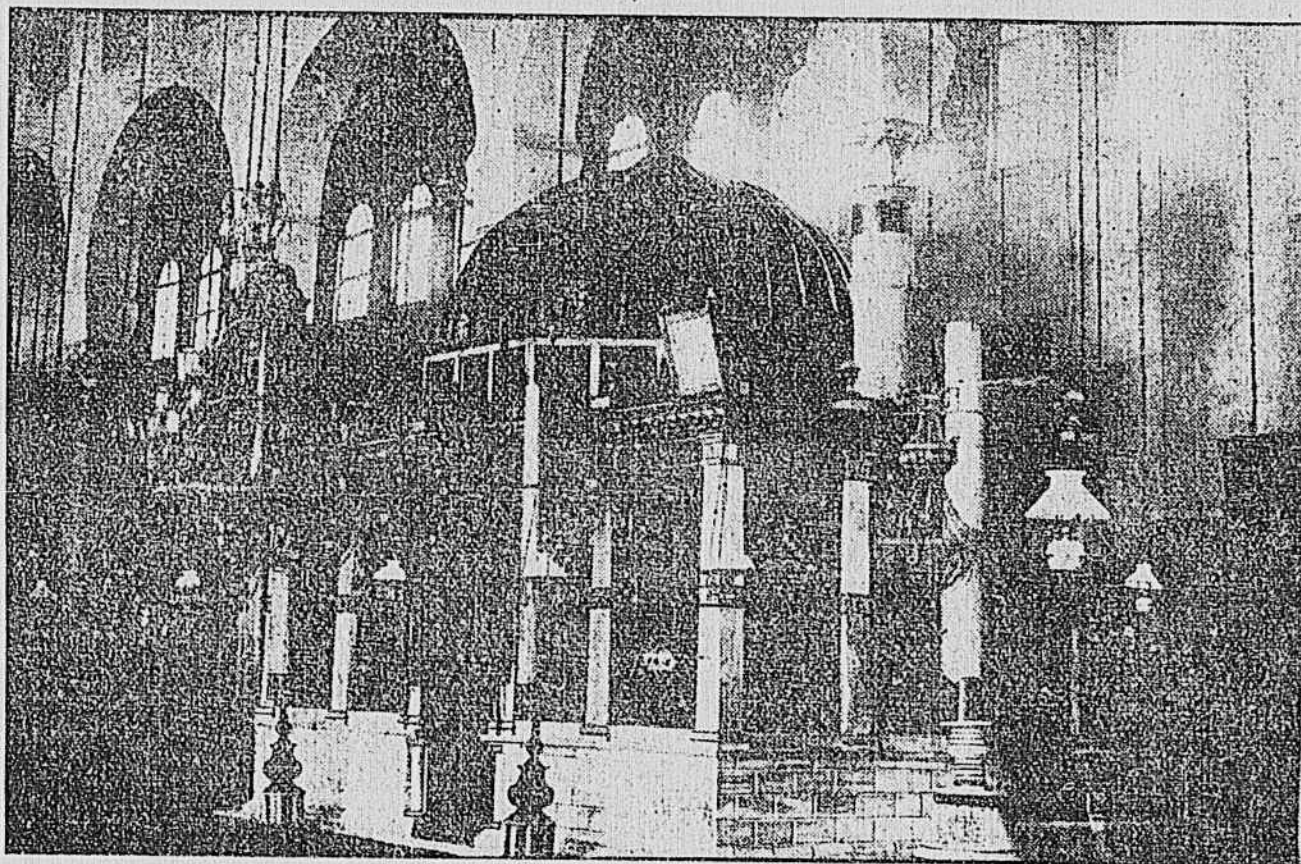
"I dare not go in. Man can enter paradise but once, and if I go into Damascus, this paradise on earth, I shall not be able to enter the paradise of the hereafter, in heaven."

The Oldest City of the World.

According to the Mohammedans, Abraham first received the divine revelation of the unity of God in Damascus, and Josephus says that the town was founded by Uz, the great-grandson of Noah. The Bible tells us that Abraham had a steward who came from Damascus, and we know that King David besieged and conquered the place. There is no doubt that it is one of the oldest, if not the very oldest, towns upon earth. It was in existence before the days of Hammurabi, before Alexandria sprang into greatness at the mouth of the Nile, and while Nebuchadnezzar was chewing grass in the gardens of Babylon. It was old long before Athens had begun to be, and was already gray-haired when Rome was a baby. It antedates any of the cities of the present, and it is now one of the most thriving centres of the Mohammedan world.

The Rivers of Naaman.

Damascus lies on the eastern side of the Lebanon Mountains, about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem and, as the crow flies, about fifty-three miles from the Mediterranean Sea. It is an oasis city, being surrounded by deserts. It is fed by two rivers which flow out of great springs in the mountains of Lebanon and make green this arid plain in which they are lost. These two are the Abana and Pharpar of the Bible. You remember how Naaman, the leper,



TOMB OF JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE GREAT MOHAMMEDAN MOSQUE.

referred to them when Elisha told him to go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and his flesh would be clean. Whereupon Naaman replied:

"Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage.

You remember also how one of his servants told Naaman that Elisha was asking a little thing of him, and how

he then went down and bathed in the Jordan, "and his flesh came again, like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

As we stand on the Hill of Mohammed, at the northwest end of the city, and look at Damascus, we do not wonder at Naaman's contentment of the Jordan. The latter is a winding, rocky, semi-alkaline stream, which flows through a valley of death to the great salt sea known as "The Dead Sea." The Abana and Pharpar are pure mountain streams, and the Abana is one of the most beautiful of the whole world. I have traveled along it almost to its source. It is a rushing river of pure, clear, green water, which spreads like a fan over all that it touches. Together with the Pharpar, it makes green the great plain which lies below us and builds up the orchards of almonds, apricots, apples and the rich crops which cover it, as well as the white city of Damascus, which lies in its centre.

A Pearl, a Spoon or a Camel.

Now, turn your eyes to the city itself. With its gardens and orchards, surrounded by deserts, it lies under these magnificent mountains. There are silver poplars within and without, and the green shines from the houses. The town has been compared to a pearl. It is shaped very like one. My guide, Shammas, who stands beside me, tells me it looks like a camel, and a second glance shows me the head and neck of the beast, reaching out to a point where lies a railway station of road going to Mecca. The road itself is the neck of the camel, and farther back is the body, the minarets forming the hump. "Now, look again," says Shammas, "and see if it is not like a fan."

"Very much so," I replied, "and it is also like a great spoon, with a long, slender handle and large oval bowl."

To come down to details, Damascus is an expanse of pearly white, tinged with the pink of its roofs. The buildings rise high over the green, and out from them, like fingers pointing to heaven, are the minarets of the mosques, with the mighty dome of the Great Mosque in the centre. At the right of the latter are the arched roofs of bazaars, which have been famous for ages, and away off from the rest is a tall, yellow building, with a roof of red tiles. This is the centre of Mohammedan fanaticism. It is the barracks where thousands of Moslem soldiers are quartered. More than 12,000 troops are kept there, and in a time of uprisings and massacres, such as that of last spring, they form the greatest danger to Christians.

Damascus is a Mohammedan city. It has about 500,000 people, and four-fifths of them follow the prophet. It has also about 20,000 Greeks, 8,000 Jews and lesser numbers of Syrians, Armenians, Persians and Indians. The city has Mohammedan schools, and the students are as dangerous as the students of the University at Cairo. These people are very devout. One sees them reading their Korans in their ships, and at every mosque I observe a score or more of the faithful waiting themselves before they go into their prayers. The mosques are full of turbaned old men and young men, who all pray singly and in groups, and in many one finds companies of worshippers, under a leader. There are also male classes listening to the explanation of the Koran by the priests, and there are men reading singly.

The Great Mosque of Damascus.

But come down with me from the hill and take a stroll through the city. This is Sunday, and we shall first visit the mosques. There are seventy large ones, where sermons are preached every Friday, and in which might be called chapels, connected with Mohammedan schools. Many of the mosques have libraries, and in all of them the chief study is theology, including the Koran and the traditions of the prophets. After that comes law, and then philosophy, logic

and grammar. Modern sciences are unknown, and all other branches of learning are entirely neglected. The chief centre of Moslem religious life is the Great Mosque. This is one of the finest of Mohammedan churches.

The Great Mosque of Damascus.

It stands right in the centre of the city, and it covers about seven acres, or almost twice as much space as the Capitol at Washington. It has a great court paved with marble, in which is a fountain, said to mark the half-way station on the route from Constantinople to Mecca. It is there that the worshippers, both the men and the women, before going into their prayers. On the other side of this enormous court is the mosque proper, the long floor of which covers over an acre. Many great columns uphold its roof and other columns stand between it and the court.

In a Mohammedan Church.

Entering this room, we find 2,000 men and perhaps 100 women at prayer. Nevertheless the building seems empty. The worshippers are scattered over the floor. The men are alone, and the women dare not look at them. They are closely veiled, and they do not notice us as we go by. Most of the men are on their knees, sitting upon the floor. All have removed their shoes before they came into the church, and their noses are covered with costly rugs, the presents from devout Mohammedans. Think of roofing a large hall, adding the roof with mighty columns, and then carpeting that field with oriental rugs, any one of which would be fit to hang on your walls as a great decorative object. Some of the outlines of the picture which now lies before us.

There are strange things in the mosque. In its centre is a marble chapel, supposed to stand over the ashes of the head of John the Baptist. Men are sitting before the chapel with their heads facing Mecca, and they rise and fall as they pray to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, and to Mohammed as the prophet of God. It is thus that religion, like politics, makes strange bedfellows.

Heart of the Mohammedan World.

Damascus is the heart of the Mohammedan world. At its back is Persia, whence the Mohammedans came, and Palestine and Arabia, which are now Moslem rather than Christian, while at the north are other realms of the Sultan--Turkey in Asia and Europe. All around it the people are Mohammedans, who hate the Christians, and massacre them whenever they can. This was the case last spring, when thousands were killed and the most terrible slaughter of Christians by heathens known to the world took place in this region. Multitudes were massacred, and it was only because the great Christians of Europe were afraid of their pocket books and the loss of that balance of power which might result from a war that the Turkish Government was not wiped out as a punishment therefor. The matter was hushed up, and but little of the true story was told in the papers. I refer to the bloodshed which took place throughout Asia Minor when the Sultan, Abdul Hamid, was overthrown and the present Sultan and government put in his place.

Another strange object in the Great Mosque is the holy tent of the pilgrim. This is used during the pilgrimage to Mecca, which annually starts at Damascus. This pilgrimage every Moslem is bound to take at least once in his life, and the tent of the prophet comes from all parts at a certain time of the year, and ride on camels, and their holy city.

As they approach Mecca they take off their clothes, laying aside everything from the soles of their feet to the crown of their heads. They march on aprons, and carrying only a piece of cloth over the left shoulder, walk barefooted, and their heads are covered with black stones. They march around the Kaaba, and kiss the black stone. The Sultan, Abdul Hamid, was overthrown and the present Sultan and government put in his place.

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